Opening Roads to Angola’s Future

by Daniela Kempf [The Humpty Dumpty Institute]

Angola’s Road Threat Reduction Project, funded by the Humpty Dumpty Institute, cleared heavily mined roads in the country’s Planalto region. The project made safe travel possible among the over 200 small communities and other bordering nations with help from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and HALO Trust. HDI opened several roads for the Angolan people, creating new possibilities for the development of Angola’s strategic reporting requirements. The only way to travel from Luanda, Angola’s capital, to the Planalto region is by plane, as the roads are mined and in otherwise bad condition. I flew to Huambo, a small, rickety plane that had to set off on a nine-hour, gun-wielding Land Rover ride via recently cleared sections of the road to reach the current location of HDI’s demining project in Chiromo. I camped there that night with HDI’s demining teams and shared there with them a food called fanga for dinner while sitting around the campfire. The following day I visited Rui Cunéque to observe a manual demining team cleaning a crucial, very densely mined bridge, followed by a visit to a mechanical task site on a nearby section of the road.

The “Bridge of a Thousand Mines” The manual task at Rui Cunéque was declared a high priority by the Angolan government because children use the bridge every day to go to school and villagers come to the river to wash their clothes. The local people call it the “Bridge of a Thousand Mines” and HALO Trust confirmed in surveys that there were literally over 1,000 landmines spread out in the four corners of the bridge and along both banks of the river, laid in 1987. HALO first cleared a small path to the river and the top of the bridge itself, so the villagers could have at least limited use of it until everything was cleared and declared safe. While I was there, several women came to wash their clothes in the river and gingerly walked on the narrow path that had been cleared and marked, just inches away from the still-mined section. I also saw a group of 25 children cross the bridge that morning on their way to the nearby school, laughing and running past the deminers who were in full gear going about their dangerous work just a few feet away.

Since then, a total of 1,102 mines have been found at the bridge and demined, with 9,134 square meters (11,379 square yards) cleared. An additional 2,260 square meters (2,703 square yards) have been “threat reduced” by heavy rollers. All of the area is currently not under water has been cleared. The final part of the mine line by the river bank is expected to be cleared later in the year when the water level is low.

Making Roads Safe I also visited HDI’s Road Threat Reduction demining team on the road from Kuito to Menongue, which is an important and long stretch of the only road from Angola to Namibia. This task was being conducted with a multi-driver track that had a large loop metal detector in the front and a trailer with weights in the back to demine mines not found by the detector. A team of manual deminers followed the truck and conducted manual verification with metal detectors. I was briefed by Gabriel Duarte Marques, the leader of the team, and talked to some of the deminers about their work and how it affects them and their families. All the deminers hired for this project have come from real communities affected by the landmine problem in Huambo and Bie provinces, and demining has provided them jobs, landmine clearance, and food income. Two of the deminers I talked to, Alberto Rafael Catamba and Pedro Domingo Nambi, who both have large families, were well-aware and proud of the positive impact their landmine clearance operations have on the community and the future of their country.

Landmines and Democracy Clearing landmines and opening up the roads also has political implications. Angola is preparing for the first free parliamentary elections next year, and these newly opened roads will allow election officials to set up polling places and send international monitors to previously isolated and unreachable villages. When the day comes, voters will be able to go to the voting booths without the fear of landmines. Angola is now free from war, but its people are still struggling with destruction, death, and the clean-up still ahead. In order to truly begin post-conflict reconstruction and set itself on the path toward democracy, Angola needs to be freed from the plight of landmines. The partnership among the Humpty Dumpty Institute, the U.S. government and HALO Trust is helping to clear Angola’s roads for a better future, safe from the risk of landmines.